

Transition from in Library Use of Resources to Outside Library Use: The impact of the Internet on Information Seeking Behavior of Medical Students and Faculty

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Advances in information technology have introduced both new capabilities and interesting challenges in accessing medical literature. More and more information resources exist in electronic format, such as online databases, journals, books, etc. instead of the traditional print format. In late 1998, there were thirty-five journal titles available online; in 2001, the number rose to over 4,000.¹ Desk-top access to online resources is changing library use patterns, which challenges libraries to adjust to this transformed information access environment. Studies of the impact of the internet on information seeking behavior of users in medical environments could provide very valuable information for medical libraries seeking to adapt to this rapid and great evolution. This study aims to explore the impact of the Internet on information seeking behavior of medical students and faculty and their medical library use, to address the possible reasons for this change of information seeking behavior, and to identify the measures essential to the transition from traditional in-library use of resources to remote access. This study is conducted in two phases.

The first study phase has been completed. Data on reference services from 1991 to 2001 at the J. Otto Lottes Health Science Library in the University of Missouri-Columbia were collected and analyzed. A two-hour interview session with one medical librarian focusing on library use was also conducted. The results showed that the general reference service requests declined drastically from a total of 25,774 in 1992 to 6,212 in 2001. Mediated search services requests also significantly decreased from 2,550 in 1991 to 298 in 2002. The interview addressed concerns with changes in the frequency of library use, collection and services that medical students and faculty requested, library building design, reasons for the changes of in library use and possible measures to provide higher level services to patrons.

The dramatic changes in reference services data indicated that reference services are not needed or being utilized to the same extent as in the past and that increasingly more people do not physically come to the library. This tendency was consistent with the outcome of the interview session, as well as a report

generated from the gate count statistics showing fewer patrons entering the library.² The rapid development of the Internet and its resultant elimination of geographic and time barriers, reduction of costs for patrons, and increased efficiency as well as individual preferences play a role in the transition of library use and change of information seeking behavior. The following factors were identified as critical areas that can improve libraries' services and enhance their transition from a "warehouse" model to a dynamic service provider:

- Library Marketing Strategies
- Provision of "virtual reference services"³
- Increase in outreach services
- Strengthening collection development
- Modifying library building design
- Tailored education for medical librarians and definition of their roles in medical education

The second phase of the study is currently being conducted. As data on reference services requests were parameters indicative of the use of reference services, the detailed classification of reference requests is currently under development. In addition, further reasons for the decreased in-library use by medical students and faculty need to be identified. Interview and focus group sessions with medical students, faculty and librarians will provide insight into reasons other than the diffusion of the Internet that could have played a role in the change of information seeking behavior.

References

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